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Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg? (Part One)

By [Errol Morris](#)

*Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow...
— T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”*

“You mean to tell me that you went all the way to the Crimea because of one sentence written by Susan Sontag?” My friend Ron Rosenbaum seemed incredulous. I told him, “No, it was actually *two* sentences.”

The sentences are from [Sontag’s “Regarding the Pain of Others.”](#) her last published book.

Here are the two sentences:

Not surprisingly many of the canonical images of early war photography turn out to have been staged, or to have had their subjects tampered with. After reaching the much shelled valley approaching Sebastopol in his horse-drawn darkroom, [Roger] Fenton made two exposures from the same tripod position: in the first version of the celebrated photo he was to call “The Valley of the Shadow of Death”(despite the title, it was not across this landscape, that the Light Brigade made its doomed charge), the cannonballs are thick on the ground to the left of the road, but before taking the second picture – the one that is always reproduced – he oversaw the scattering of the cannonballs on the road itself.

There are no photographs – only references to photographs – in Sontag’s book.[1] I will make this a little easier for the reader. Here are the two Fenton photographs taken “from the same tripod position.” I gave them the names – “OFF” and “ON” – the-photograph-with-cannonballs-*off*-the-road and the-photograph-with-cannonballs-*on*-the-road.



Fenton, Roger. Valley of The Shadow of Death. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.



Fenton, Roger. Valley of The Shadow of Death. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

I spent a considerable amount of time looking at the two photographs and thinking about the two sentences. Sontag, of course, does not claim that Fenton altered either photograph *after taking them* – only that he altered or “staged” the *second* photograph by altering the *landscape* that was photographed. This much seems clear. But how did Sontag know that

Fenton altered the landscape or, for that matter, “oversaw the scattering of the cannonballs on the road itself?”

Surely, any evidence of this would be independent of the photographs. We don’t see Fenton (or anyone else for that matter) in either of the photographs bending down as if to pick up or put down a cannonball. How does Sontag know what Fenton was doing or why he was doing it? (To up the ante, Sontag’s sentence also suggests a certain laziness on Fenton’s part, as if he himself couldn’t be bothered with picking up or putting down a cannonball himself, but instead supervised or oversaw their placement. The imperious Fenton: *Hey, you, over there. Pick up that cannonball and move it on to the road. No not there. A little more to the left.* Or maybe it wasn’t laziness. Maybe he had a bad back. The incapacitated Fenton: *Boy, my back is killing me. Would you mind picking up a few cannonballs and carrying them on to the road?*)

While I was wrestling with these questions, it occurred to me that there was an even deeper question. How did Sontag know the *sequence* of the photographs? How did she know which photograph came first, OFF or ON? Presumably, there had to be some additional information that allowed the photographs to be ordered: before and after. If this is the basis for her claim that the second photograph was staged – that the landscape was posed for the *second* photograph – shouldn’t she offer some evidence? Fenton takes one photograph (OFF), oversees the scattering of the cannonballs and then takes another photograph (ON).

There are no footnotes in Sontag’s book, but fortunately there is an acknowledgment section at the end:

I owe the information that there were two versions of Fenton’s “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” to Mark Haworth-Booth of the Victoria and Albert Museum; both are reproduced in “The Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War,” by Ulrich Keller (Routledge, 2001).

I bought a copy of [Ulrich Keller’s book](#) and turned immediately to the section on the two photographs. Chapter Four: “The Valley of the Shadow of Death: The Triumph of Photography.” And found the following passage where Keller lays claim to a number of historical discoveries – namely that there are two photographs, that the photographs are slightly different and that the cannonballs in the second photograph were placed there either by Fenton or under Fenton’s direction (ON).

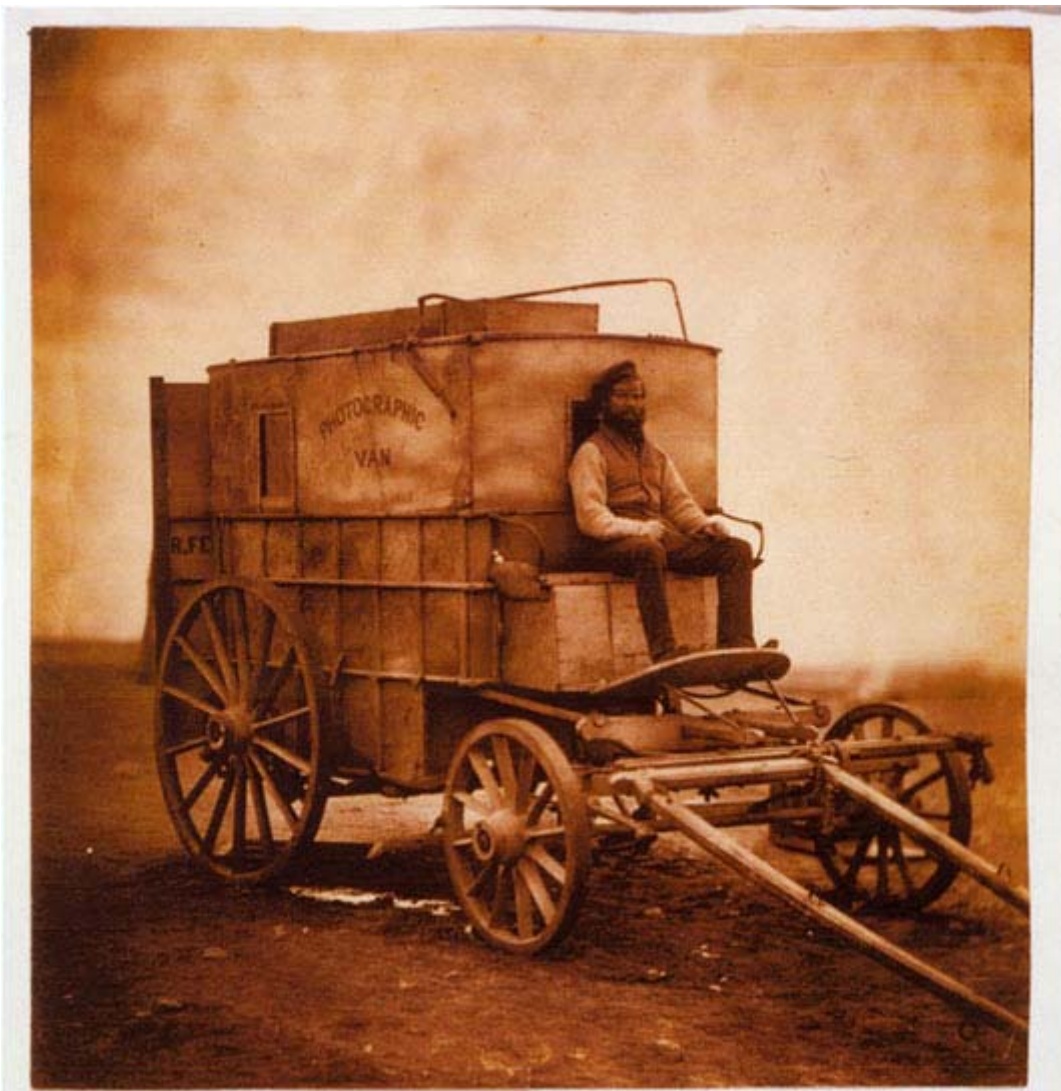
Here is the text (the emphases in italics are mine):

A slight but significant difference between Fenton’s two pictures of the site seems to have escaped the attention of photographic historians. The first variant *obviously* represents the road to the trenches in the state in which the photographer found it, with the cannonballs lining the side of the road. In a second version we discover a new feature. Some round-shot is now demonstratively distributed all over the road surface – as if the balls had just been hurled there, exposing the photographer to a hail of fire. Not content

with the peaceful state of things recorded in the first picture, Fenton *obviously* rearranged the evidence in order to create a sense of drama and danger that had originally been absent from the scene.

In turn, this passage references a footnote where Keller further expands on his claims about Fenton's personality:

“That Fenton tended to exaggerate the dangers of his photographic campaign, too, can be gathered from ‘The Daily News’ of September 20, 1855, which lists a series of his close calls, such as his operating van... being frequently an object of suspicion with the Russians; himself being wounded by a shell; his assistant shot in the hand by a ball from a Minié rifle.”



Sparling, Fenton's assistant, gets his picture taken before heading to the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Fenton had written, “The picture was due to the precaution of the driver on that day, who suggested as there were a possibility of a stop being put in that valley to the further travels of both vehicle and driver, it would be showing a proper

consideration for both to take a likeness of them before starting.” (Credit: Library of Congress)

Keller says that the first photograph *obviously* “represents the road...in which the photographer found it” (OFF) and Fenton *obviously* “rearranged the evidence,” that is the cannonballs, in the second photograph (ON).

As I’ve said elsewhere: *Nothing* is so obvious that it’s obvious. When someone says that something is *obvious*, it seems almost certain that it is anything but obvious – even to them. The use of the word “obvious” indicates the absence of a logical argument – an attempt to convince the reader by asserting the truth of something by saying it a little louder.

I called Keller in Germany, where he is on leave from the University of California, Santa Barbara.

ERROL MORRIS: I became aware of your book on Fenton by reading Susan Sontag. She refers to your book in her afterword, and talks about the two photographs captioned: “The Valley of the Shadow of Death.” She suggests that Fenton posed one of the photographs.

ULRICH KELLER: Yes.

ERROL MORRIS: She seems to have taken most of that material wholesale from you.

ULRICH KELLER: Yes, I guess one could say that. Yes.

ERROL MORRIS: What interests me is this idea that one of the photographs was posed. Of one of the photographs being a fake.

ULRICH KELLER: It has been sort of retouched or interfered with to get some drama into it that wasn’t originally in it. I wouldn’t go so far as to say it’s a fake, but it’s deceptive. Certainly.

ERROL MORRIS: Deceptive in what way?

ULRICH KELLER: Well, deceptive in that it creates the impression that the picture was taken under great danger when that was not the case.

ERROL MORRIS: Both pictures?

ULRICH KELLER: The second one. It’s clear that the one with cannonballs on the surface of the road must be later, obviously.

ERROL MORRIS: Why?

ULRICH KELLER: Well, because of two pictures, one has the cannonballs resting in the ditch there to the side (OFF) and the other one has them on the surface of the road (ON). It's much, much more likely to assume that Fenton would have taken these balls out of the ditch and onto the road rather than the other way round. What motivation would he have had to take cannonballs that were on the road and remove them? Why would he do that? So I think it's pretty obvious. But you have doubts about that?

ERROL MORRIS: Yes. I have wondered how you came to the conclusion that the one with the cannonballs on the road (ON) has to be the second photograph. You suggest that Fenton was not in danger but wanted to ratchet up the drama of the scene by making it look as though he were under attack. That Fenton wanted to convey a false impression of derring-do to the prospective viewer of the photograph. But why do you believe that? I may not be phrasing this very well. If not, my apology.

ULRICH KELLER: Well, I can see a motivation for him to take the balls out of the ditch and put them in the middle of the road. That makes sense to me. It's something that I think is plausible for someone to do. The other way around, I don't know why anyone would do that. I don't think it's likely.

ERROL MORRIS: Is it the absence of a psychological explanation that makes "the other way around" unlikely or implausible?

ULRICH KELLER: Yes.

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But is it so psychologically implausible for Fenton to have removed the balls from the road? Ann Petrone, who works in my office, says, "Of course he took the balls off the road. Don't they need to use the road?" She calls it the commonsense solution. But there could be artistic reasons, as well. Fenton could have liked the aesthetic quality that the barren road would have given him. He could have put the balls on the road for the first picture (ON) and then taken them off the road for the second (OFF), because he preferred the simplicity of OFF. Maybe he saw the balls on the road and felt they looked fake, and removed them in the interest of creating a more honest picture.

In Keller's book, there is a letter from Fenton to his wife dated April 24, 1855. Fenton's entire correspondence from the Crimea, 25 letters, is [available on line](#). This is an excerpt from letter No. 10:

...Yesterday after finishing the last picture of the Panorama I got Sir John to lend me a couple of mules to take my caravan down to a ravine known by the name of the valley of the shadow of Death from the quantity of Russian balls which have fallen in it... We were detained in setting off & so got down just about 3PM yesterday. I took the van down nearly as far as I intended it to go & then went forward to find out the chosen spot. I had scarcely started when a dash up of dust behind the battery before us showed something was on the road to us, we could not see it but another flirt of earth nearer

showed that it was coming straight & in a moment we saw it bounding up towards us. It turned off when near & where it went I did not see as a shell came over about the same spot, knocked it [sic] fuse out & joined the mass of its brethren without bursting. It was plain that the line of fire was upon the very spot I had chosen, so very reluctantly I put up with another reach of the valley about 100 yds short of the best point. I brought the van down & fixed the camera & while leveling it another ball came in a more slanting direction touching the rear of the battery as the others but instead of coming up the road bounded on to the hill on our left about 50 yards from us & came down right to us stopping at our feet. I picked it up put it into the van & hope to make you a present of it. After this no more came near though plenty passed up on each side. We were there an hour & a half an [sic] got 2 good pictures returning back in triumph with our trophies finishing the days work but taking the van to the mortar battery on the top of the hill in front of the light division...

Here are the facts as expressed in the letter:

- 1) The photographs were taken on April 23, 1855 — the day before the letter was written.
- 2) Fenton took the photographs in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, so named because of “the quantity of Russian cannonballs that had fallen there.”
- 3) The two photographs were taken between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m.. They arrived “about 3 p.m.” and stayed “about an hour & a half.”
- 3) Fenton and his assistant set up in a hazardous location and then retreated 100 yards up the road. Even though the location was no longer directly in the line of fire, they were still at considerable risk.
- 6) Fenton took one of the cannonballs as a trophy to present to his wife.

The letter is a godsend. It provides an extraordinary amount of useful information. Without it, we would probably not be able to determine when and where the photographs were taken. But the letter makes no reference to the order of the photographs nor to whether the cannonballs were put on or taken off the road. There is no mention made of the two photographs save for the information that Fenton “got two good pictures returning back in triumph with our trophies...”

I read further in Keller but found no reference to Fenton *overseeing* the scattering of the cannonballs. It's not in Fenton's letters, so where did this idea come from? I started to wonder. Which came first: a conjecture about the order of the photographs based on Fenton's (real or imagined) intentions or a specific piece of historical information, for example, something that Fenton had written that revealed the order of the photographs? (If Fenton had written to his wife, for example, that he had overseen the scattering of the balls, the question would be laid to rest. At least we would know that Fenton had *claimed* to have done that. Regardless of whether he *did* do it.)

This led to me to a more general question: Would it be possible to order these photographs not based on anything that Fenton said (which might be unreliable) – but based on evidence in the photographs themselves? This idea appealed to me because it did not require me to imagine something about Fenton’s intentions, that is, about his internal mental state. After all, how can I know what the guy sitting next to me in Starbucks is thinking, let alone a man who lived 150 years ago?

My next interview was with Mark Haworth-Booth, the former curator of photography at the Victoria & Albert in London. Haworth-Booth, of course, was Sontag’s primary source. He was the one who referred her to Ulrich Keller’s monograph on Fenton, and I was of course interested in the details of how this all happened.

HAWORTH-BOOTH: Mark Holborn, Sontag’s editor in London called me and told me that Sontag was looking for some material about Fenton, and I sent him some photocopies of a thing I’d written a long time ago. He passed them on to her, and she was very grateful. She didn’t really quote them very accurately. She overstated what I said, which is very characteristic of her writing. It became much more black-and-white and strident than it was when I said it. I was raising doubts, but she assumed that my doubts were a matter of fact rather than speculation. Anyway, I was very grateful for the nice acknowledgment.

ERROL MORRIS: Can I see the article you sent her?

HAWORTH-BOOTH: Well, it doesn’t really amount to very much. It’s just a paragraph or so in a book I did called “[Old and Modern Masters of Photography](#),” and it has a short introduction in which this speculation about “Valley of the Shadow of Death” appears. It came out about 1981.

ERROL MORRIS: And the nature of the speculation?

HAWORTH-BOOTH: Well, I noticed that there are two versions of the “Valley of the Shadow of Death” about 25 years ago, and it made me think: one of the pictures is clearly much more interesting and expressive than the other. So I began to wonder if Fenton and his assistant helped the composition by moving the cannonballs themselves. That’s what I raised as a speculation.

ERROL MORRIS: Hold on just one second. My aging dog wants to get up on a chair. Well, the issue of the two Fenton photographs, were you the first to notice that?

HAWORTH-BOOTH: As far as I’m aware. Other people have claimed it, but they claimed it many years after me. The main person I’m aware of who thinks he was the first, the man who did the book on all the different representations of the Crimean War. I think his name is Ulrich Keller.

ERROL MORRIS: Yes. I’ve spoken to him. I’m familiar with the book.

HAWORTH-BOOTH: Good. His book is terrific. Anyway, he thought he had invented the idea. But I had published it in 1981, so I'm kind of a long way in the lead of him. I mean, it's certainly pretty obvious, but no one that I'm aware of had noticed it before. I just happened to have two books open on my desk at the same time when I was having lunch, and I noticed this difference.

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Even though Haworth-Booth and Keller disagree about who first discovered the twin photographs, they do agree that OFF was first and ON second. They also agree that Fenton, in all likelihood, posed the second photograph. However, as Haworth-Booth suggested in my interview with him, this is not a view shared by all museum curators of photography. Gordon Baldwin, recently retired as a curator at the Getty in Los Angeles, has his own views of the order of the two photographs. I called him.

ERROL MORRIS: I'm interested in two photographs – the two versions of Fenton's "The Valley of the Shadow of Death".

GORDON BALDWIN: O.K., excellent. As you perhaps have heard I have strong opinions on the subject.

ERROL MORRIS: Ah. I am more than interested.

GORDON BALDWIN: Well, I've written an essay – not a very long one – the Folio Society is publishing a book in a few months called "The Hundred Greatest Photographs." I wrote three essays for the book and that's one of them. I think there's a clear explanation for what happened – why there are two photographs, and why they're different. And I think earlier readings in which people have thought that Fenton was moving cannonballs around are erroneous. I don't think he moved cannonballs around. The cannonballs were *harvested*, so to speak, by soldiers who were there. The place that Fenton went to make the photograph – there are accounts in the London Illustrated News about that place and in that account that appeared they talk about the fact that the soldiers harvested the cannonballs in order to fire them back.

ERROL MORRIS: Recycled them?

GORDON BALDWIN: Yeah, recycling. Heavy duty recycling. I think that's what happened. I don't know, have you had a chance to look at Fenton's correspondence on the subject of "The Valley of the Shadow of Death"? There are two different letters that he wrote which deal with that place and what happened there. In the first one he talked about going to reconnoiter the site – and this is without a camera – and talks about cannonballs so thick on the ground it was difficult to walk without treading on them. Which indicates to me a lot of cannonballs. And then in the second letter where he describes making the photographs, he talks about being under fire. At the time cannonballs are bouncing around. I don't think that someone who was under fire would have had the time or inclination to be moving cannonballs around, but soldiers might well

have done so. There's a correspondent for the London Times who describes horses swaybacked from the weight of the cannonballs that they were carrying. Russell, the Times correspondent describes it, and this is part of that recycling process. I think that's what happened. So what people commonly have thought is the *first* photograph with few cannonballs (OFF) is the *second* photograph after some of them have been removed.

ERROL MORRIS: What attracted my attention to all of this is a couple of paragraphs in Susan Sontag's last book.

GORDON BALDWIN: Oh, dear. Yes, O.K. I don't think she's very good on Fenton, frankly, but go ahead.

ERROL MORRIS: She mentions how one of the Fenton photographs was posed or staged. That we're always *disappointed* when we learn that a photograph has been posed. Then she goes on to talk about the difference between fake paintings and fake photographs. Namely, a fake painting is a painting with faulty provenance— say, a painting that is purportedly by Vermeer, but turns out to be painted by somebody else. But according to Sontag, a fake photograph is a photograph that's been posed. A perfect illustration of what she's talking about would be the purportedly posed photograph by Fenton, what she takes to be the second photograph [ON] in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

GORDON BALDWIN: There are photographs of which this is quite true, particularly photographs made by Alexander Gardiner during the American Civil War, but I don't think that is what Fenton did. It's a somewhat debunking way of looking at Fenton's work. Vicki Goldberg would be someone who would subscribe to this point of view, as well, but I don't think that's what happened. Fenton's own work tells us that that isn't what happened. I don't think it was like him to have manipulated – to have falsified an image in that way – and one reason I'd say so is: he was simply photographing the place as he found it. I don't think he had an idea about the symbolic – what later people would say was the symbolic value of the photograph. In other words, most of his photographs from the Crimea are documentation of places where battles have occurred. I don't think he meant to make a highly charged photograph. The place was quite well known. He didn't name it "The Valley of the Shadow of Death," the soldiers had, and it was named that simply because it was a dangerous place. The ravine was a place where the Russians feared a surreptitious attack would be launched on a position of theirs and to forestall that, they shelled it periodically regardless of whether there were people there. And so it got this nickname. When Fenton went there, he was going to a place he knew about, but I don't think he intended to so weight the image as subsequent critics have. As a metaphor for devastation it's a wonderful photograph, but I'm not sure that was really his intention in making it. That makes some sense I hope?

ERROL MORRIS: Yes, of course it does. But it is still unusual that he took two photographs. I don't know of any other example – correct me if I'm wrong – where he took a pair of photographs from the same camera position.

GORDON BALDWIN: No, I don't think there is one. I think you're quite right. Certainly when he makes panoramas in the Crimea, the camera is in one place and it's rotated to a degree.

[Baldwin is referring to the overlapping photographs that Fenton took from the British encampments. Just as Fenton had made an experiment with time by taking two still pictures from the same camera position, he experimented with space by creating some of the first panoramas.]

ERROL MORRIS: Yeah, he's panning.

GORDON BALDWIN: Yeah, although he's not terribly skillful at it, to tell the truth. The edges don't quite line up the way they might. But those are quite different from the photographs in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. He's there for an hour and a half and comes back with two photographs. His van is drawn by army mules, not by horses in this instant, and with the army mules came a soldier or two. Sparling, his assistant was there. He was always there. I've pulled out the page from the Folio Society book. What Fenton wrote to his wife in this first one, this is a couple of weeks before he made the photographs. "Farther on the balls lay thicker but in coming to a ravine called the valley of death the site passed all imagination. Ground shot and shell lay like a stream at the bottom of the hollow all the way down. You could not walk without treading upon them..." That was written on the 4th of April. On the 23rd of April, when he's writing again, he writes saying – because he's been forced to retreat from the camera position he wanted to use, because of being fired at. He writes, "very reluctantly I've put up with another reach of the valley, a 100 yards short of the best point. I brought the van down and fixed the camera... We were there an hour and a half and got two good pictures, returning in triumph with our trophy." He doesn't say anything about moving cannonballs around. I really don't think he's managing the image in that way, much as I find Ms. Sontag interesting about photography, I don't think she's right about Fenton.

ERROL MORRIS: In the book there's a citation to a monogram by Ulrich Keller. Which I dutifully bought and read.

GORDON BALDWIN: I don't think he likes Fenton very much. He certainly thinks he's a creature of the Establishment. But how could he not be, in a sense?

ERROL MORRIS: Keller's argument interested me, and it's essentially picked up by Sontag, that Fenton was a coward. Or if not a coward that he was a person who was very, very reluctant to expose himself to any *real* danger. That the cannonballs were rearranged by Fenton – this would be Keller's argument – to make it look as though he was in greater danger than he was, that this place where he had taken the photograph was something of a tourist attraction – the visitors or who you wanted to show a piece of the Crimean War, and it would be the place to do it. I hope I'm characterizing it correctly. I believe I am.

GORDON BALDWIN: It was a place that wasn't very safe to be. It wouldn't have acquired that name had it not been. The fact that the Times sketch artist – the Illustrated News sketch artist – made a picture at exactly, or very close to, the same point that Fenton's photograph was made indicates it certainly had a certain renown, and I don't suppose every nook or fold of the landscape had a name given to it by soldiers. But I wouldn't have said that Fenton was at all cowardly. I think he was quite an adventurous character. He simply documented what was available to him during the time he was there. He happened to be in the Crimea at a point when there wasn't much fighting going on. The great assault on Sebastopol occurs after he's left. Have you read the letters?

ERROL MORRIS: I've read some of them, yeah. Not all of them, but a good number of them.

GORDON BALDWIN: I don't know whether you've read them in the Gernsheim version or in the online version.

ERROL MORRIS: I've read both.

GORDON BALDWIN: Because Gernsheim edited the letters in a way that I think was unfortunate. He takes out the endearments, which is too bad because they give a flavor to his writings. Would you apply the same argument to the sketch artist? That he went there to prove that he was exposing himself to danger?

ERROL MORRIS: Presumably you have to take into account the conventions of the time.

GORDON BALDWIN: Victorian sensibilities. British sensibilities would not have shown dead or dying people. The photographs of the dead don't occur until a little later, and it's always of the enemy. At least initially it's of the enemy – the photographs that are made a couple of years later of the revolt in India – of dead, enemy. Similarly, when Alexander Gardiner is photographing corpses on the field at Gettysburg, they're the enemy. One doesn't photograph one's own dead. Because there was so little fighting where Fenton was, there were no Russian corpses he could photograph. He wasn't close enough to fighting to be able to photograph Russian corpses if there had been some. His van was an easy target; it was big, but he needed it there because of the photographic processes he employed. It would have been a violation of Victorian sensibilities to have photographed the dead.

It's Gardiner later who does photograph corpses. It's Gardiner photographing Confederate dead. Fenton certainly sees wounded British coming back to camp and things like that – and sees British corpses being carried away, but I don't think one photographs that. It would have been alien to his own sensibilities, and his own sensibilities were not so very different from general sensibilities at that point. The Crimean War was extremely unpopular, and it was very badly run, not so badly run by generals, but the supply corps was hopelessly antiquated. The soldiers, in that first winter, before Fenton arrived, had inadequate food, inadequate shelter, inadequate clothing. The images that are propagandistic are the ones that show that the soldiers are adequately

housed, adequately clothed. To that extent Fenton is a propagandist, but I don't think it goes much farther than that, and indeed by the time he'd gotten to the Crimea, things had considerably improved.

ERROL MORRIS: I read that the photograph of Sparling and the van was taken the same day Fenton took the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" picture and that Fenton had taken Sparling's photograph at Sparling's request because Sparling thought that this would be his last day on earth.

GORDON BALDWIN: Yes, I think that's how the story runs, but I'm not sure where it comes from. I don't have any reason to think that it may not be true, but Sparling is a fairly funny character. He isn't simply Fenton's assistant although he functions that way for a long time and advertised himself as being assistant to Mr. Fenton. He was a very smart guy. He wrote a manual on photography that is extraordinarily clear and beautifully phrased, but he didn't have Fenton's class advantages. Sparling asked that that photograph be made because he knew they were going back to this place which was dangerous, which Fenton had been to before – although it doesn't say that Sparling was with him the first time and since he didn't have a camera with him when he went out to reconnoiter three weeks before, it's possible Sparling wasn't there. If Sparling thought it was that dangerous, isn't that testimony to the contrary of Keller's contention that Fenton was cowardly?

ERROL MORRIS: Yes, it is. Although it could just be that Sparling was also cowardly.

GORDON BALDWIN: Perhaps [laughter]. How far can one extrapolate that? Who else was cowardly? My general view is that Fenton is a more admirable kind of character than Keller thinks. He and I have had some conversation – quite a number of years ago – about Fenton. I simply disagree with everything he had to say of the subject. I just didn't think the way he was analyzing his character was useful and I thought that the evidence we have runs to the contrary. The letters of course – Fenton could not have foreseen that they would be published. And they were published way after his death. The family realized that they were important enough to copy them. The letters that have been published are the result of somebody in the family copying the letters into a book. The letters themselves don't exist. There were two books which descended in different parts of the family. One of them is at Austin and the other one's at Bradford. They vary slightly. They're not exactly the same content, but they preserved the letters and clearly the family felt they were important enough to want to preserve them. He is not writing for the public, and of course he doesn't want to make himself seem unattractive or cowardly to his family or his publisher, since the letters are variously written to his wife, to his brother and to his publisher. He's just trying to tell about what happened. It's too bad there aren't letters from other periods of his life, but there aren't except for his official correspondence for the Photographic Society. Clearly, the letters give a picture of a different kind of man than Keller thinks.

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This view contra Keller and Sontag – namely that the order is ON then OFF – is also held by Malcolm Daniel, the curator of photography of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the author of an article in the recent exhibition catalog, “All the Mighty World: The Photographs of Roger Fenton.” Daniel told me that he, too, believes in the recycling theory.

MALCOLM DANIEL: The long and short of it — or the short of it — is: we don't know which of the two pictures came first. For a long time it was thought that the first one would be without as many cannonballs on the road (OFF) and that Fenton pulled them out of the ditches and littered the road with them (ON) to make the picture more dramatic. We now think that the opposite is true. There are references in Fenton's own letters – a reference to British soldiers collecting the cannonballs to fire them back in the other direction. We just can't know. People have sort of assumed that he put more there (ON) to make the photograph more dramatic, but it's just speculation. The danger was real, also – as you can tell from the fact that there are cannonballs there at all. It is an area that was certainly within range, and he had this big van that he was carrying along with him, and you remember that Marcus Sparling, his assistant, made him take the picture of Sparling sitting on the photographic van before they went into the Valley of the Shadow of Death because he was worried that they might not come out. So, I don't know. There's no inscription, no documentation to say which one is first, and so we can speculate that he's making a more dramatic picture or one can say: well, we have this reference to soldiers collecting the cannonballs to fire back in the opposite direction, and so it's probably more likely they were removed than that he went out there and lugged them around. I mean those things are heavy. It's just highly unlikely that he would go traipse around and scatter them over the road.

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Two sets of esteemed curators. Two sets of diametrically opposite conclusions. There is the expectation if you have an odd number of voters that there is little chance for a tie. So I looked for a tiebreaker – a fifth arbiter, Richard Pare. Pare, the author of a monograph on Fenton, has written eloquently on why these photographs are important:

One of the undisputed masterpieces of photography is the Valley of the Shadow of Death, so potent was it already as a symbol of the war that the location is indicated on the printed key. Here he increases still further the divorcement of the subject from any specific identification with place. He had wanted to make an altogether different picture facing towards Sebastopol and full of specific and identifiable markers. Instead he was compelled by immediate danger to retreat a little way back up the track and in so doing was presented with the picture that he chose to record. It is devoid of any topographical detail that defines a particular place; it becomes instead an image about the horror of all war and the mundane business of destruction. It suggests only the potential for sudden and indiscriminate death. Fenton made two versions of the image and by imposing the one on the other it is possible to see that the second and published version is in all likelihood an arranged image. It makes the message of the image more emphatic and is a

photographic solution that was unique. It has no precedent and no successors; it is a stark description of a dreadful subject. The first iconic photograph of war.

From the above text it would seem clear that Pare believes that OFF comes before he ON. Yet he describes himself as a flip-flopper on this very question. Some days he looks at the photographs and thinks it's OFF followed by ON, on others, ON followed by OFF. Far from breaking the tie between the OFF's-then-ON's (Keller and Haworth-Booth) and the ON's-then-OFFS's (Daniel and Baldwin), he further underlines the problem of using "logic" or "psychology" to adjudicate the issue.

RICHARD PARE: I go back and forth. Probably Fenton went out there or Sparling, his assistant, went out there and arranged the cannonballs, but then I look at it again and there just doesn't seem to be a logic for that conclusion. If you compare by flipping back and forth between the two frames on the computer, you can see where the cannonballs go missing from, and it doesn't necessarily seem to follow what you would do if you were going to embark upon an enterprise of that kind. So there's another possibility. There was a salvaging party, down there at the same time, gathering them up, but he doesn't say in the letters that he wrote to his wife that there was anything like that going on. In other accounts of the war there are the most explicit descriptions of the ground being literally littered with cannonballs to the point where the horses had trouble picking their way between them. So it's not in any way an extreme situation that he's laying out, even if he is arranging them. The question is whether you think that that's like the Arthur Rothstein thing of moving a cow skull in the desert and courting abuse during the WPA. [2] I tend to think that just as an image, it's so powerful and such an extraordinary expression of that silent horror of the war – whatever he does to it. Both versions are powerful. With the additional cannonballs scattered about on the ground, it becomes a little more compelling. Does that make any sense?

ERROL MORRIS: Absolutely. The oddity, of course, is that there're two photographs.

RICHARD PARE: Right. You know, of course, that they are not the pictures he was intending to make, right? Can you hang on just a second? I've got the guy who's been in trying to fix my printer. It's just about ready to go. I'll be right back.

ERROL MORRIS: Okay. Absolutely.

RICHARD PARE: Right. Where was I?

ERROL MORRIS: We were talking about the pair of photographs.

RICHARD PARE: Yeah. It's not even the picture that he intended to make originally. He'd been out scouting, some days before, and had intended to make a picture further down the valley or the gully – it's not so much a valley – towards Sebastopol and was driven back because there was too much fire coming in. Probably the pictures he was intending to make would have been far more site-specific. There would have been identifiable topographical features that people would recognize.

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As Gordon Baldwin points out, Fenton had gone to the Valley of the Shadow of Death at least once before. Fenton mentions this in a letter dated April 4-5, 1855:

...we walked along a kind of common for half a mile coming towards the end upon Russian cannon balls scattered about. Further on the balls lay thicker, but in coming to a ravine called the valley of death the sight passed all imagination [—] round shot & shell lay in a stream at the bottom of the hollow all the way down you could not walk without treading upon them [—] following the curve of the ravine towards the town we came to a cavern in which some soldiers were stationed as a picket. They had made a garden in front forming the borders of the beds with cannon balls. We had gone a little further down & were admiring the rugged outline of the rock & pondering out where the face had been smashed by the Russians fire when we were startled by a great crack in the rock in front of us & a cloud of dust followed by a second knock upon the opposite face of the ravine as the ball bounded across it & then a heap of stones & the ball rolled away together down the ravine...

But what does this tell us?

“...[T]he sight passed all imagination...you could not walk without treading on them.” There were cannonballs everywhere. Could it be – having seen the road on April 4 when the Russian cannonballs were “scattered about” – that Fenton sought to *recreate* on April 23 what he had seen earlier? Is ON merely a re-enactment of a previously seen event? Did he arrive at the Valley of the Shadow of Death on April 23 only to be disappointed to see fewer cannonballs on the road than he had seen earlier, then scatter the balls to evoke what he seen earlier?

Again, these questions are not answered by Fenton’s letters.

The recycling issue is also of interest, but it cannot resolve the question of which came first – ON or OFF. British soldiers could have collected the balls on the hillsides and left them to be picked up on the road. Fenton takes the first picture (OFF) before the British soldiers pick up the balls, and then takes the second picture after the balls have been piled on the road (ON). In this scenario, OFF comes first, then ON. Or Fenton could have come on the balls collected on the road, taken the first picture (ON), watched as British soldiers piled them on horse-drawn carts, waited for the carts to leave, and then taken the second picture (OFF). In this scenario, ON comes first, then OFF. Note: in both scenarios Fenton has not intervened nor posed anything. The British army could have put the balls on the road and then taken them off to secure passage through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. In this instance, by Sontag’s criteria, *neither* image would be posed.

The possibility of recycling does not help. It can support either conclusion – ON before OFF or OFF before ON. To make matters worse, recycling doesn’t have to be involved in any way – just because cannonballs were *often* recycled doesn’t mean that they *were* recycled *between* the taking of the two photographs. There could have been no recycling

on April 23, the day Fenton took the pictures. Recycling may be a good thing – even when it involves cannonballs – but it can't help us determine the order of the photographs.

So why are these respected curators proposing such a theory? Here is a simple reason. They are defending Fenton's character from the depredations of his antagonists. Is Fenton a coward? Did Fenton fake his iconic photograph of the Crimean War? Did Fenton oversee the scattering of the cannonballs? I imagine their defense of Fenton in front of some imaginary jury. No. It's not in accord with Fenton's character. It was done by others, by the British Army. Fenton is *not* a coward. He was in the line of fire. Here they are offering a new *psychological* theory to counter the *psychological* theory advanced by Keller. [3] But what does Fenton's character – or his "psychology" – have to do with it?

Much of the problem comes from our collective need to endow photographs with intentions – even though there are no people in the frame, including Fenton himself, who is conspicuously absent. The minute we start to conjecture about Fenton's reasons, his intent – his psychological state – we are walking on unhallowed ground. Can we read Fenton's intentions off of a photographic plate? Is there anything in the letters that tells us what he was really thinking and what really happened?

This is when I decided to try to determine the order of the pictures completely independent of suppositions about Fenton or his psychological state – his intentions, his beliefs. I wanted to leave Fenton out of it. Was there a way to order the photographs based on what we see in the photographs – nothing more?

The first question was which direction was Fenton facing — north, south, east or west? Was he looking in the direction from where the cannonballs were coming or in the opposite direction? The photograph looks as though the camera is pointed up into the hills rather than down into the valley. South rather than north.

Keller makes this point in "The Ultimate Spectacle":

Fenton made two decisions reflecting his reluctance to expose himself to risks. First of all, of the two similarly shaped valleys, he chose the less dangerous one in the back of Chapman's Batteries. Secondly, he stopped in the upper, shallow part of the ravine, not in the deeper, more advanced part shown in the "best general views." Here, he decided to turn the camera back up towards the camps, rather than downward in the direction of Sebastopol, as Simpson and Robertson had done.

Fenton "decided to turn the camera back up towards the camps," that is, the pictures were taken looking south. Pare came to the same conclusion. He is also convinced that Fenton "turned around and, literally facing in the opposite direction, looking uphill back towards the Allies encampment...was confronted by the picture..." But where is the evidence?

Keller has never gone to the Crimea. Pare has gone but was unable to find the Valley of the Shadow of Death. To be sure, there are problems finding it.

Both Keller and Pare believe that Fenton was facing south – back toward the British encampments. Could they be mistaken? How did they determine this? Neither of them had stood where Fenton stood, looked through a camera lens and tried to match the contemporary landscape with the images that Fenton had taken 150 years before.

It was at this point that I resolved to go to the Crimea and to find the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

I would like to propose a contest to the Times' readership — an invitation to order the photographs and to propose reasons why they *must* be in that order. Anything is fair game. Any kind of evidence may be considered, and I will discuss the solutions in a followup article. Good luck.

Footnotes

[1] Sontag's unwillingness to include photographs in her book becomes a troublesome conceit. The presence of photographs in her manuscript would force us to ask questions about the photographs themselves. Without photographs Sontag's theoretical concerns predominate, and we end up thinking about her remarks in a photographic vacuum.

[2] Arthur Rothstein was accused of fakery for moving a cow skull ten feet. I plan to discuss this controversy – and the issue of posing in general – in a subsequent essay.

[3] I might add that my interpretation of Baldwin's and Daniel's motivations is *also* a psychological theory.